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03/25/2017

Voices of Diversity

BFE: A Critical Review

BFE stands for “Bum Fuck Egypt” A play written by Julia Cho which documents the struggles of an Asian American girl growing up in the American Midwest. Panny is the name of this young girl and she is the main character of our play. She is supported by her uncle, Lefty, and mother, Isabel. Lefty and Isabel are siblings that were adopted at a young age and have grown up basically having only each other as support. Ironically they offer little to no support and Panny is left to defend herself in a world that gives her no support and no acceptance. She longs for belonging and for a normal life yet she struggles to find acceptance even in those closest to her like her best friend, Nancy, and her mother, Isabel. The play was written in 2006 and is set in the nineties in the Midwest in a state such as Nevada, Kansas, Kentucky, Arkansas etc. The theater department at the University of Georgia (UGA) put this play on in the Spring semester of 2018. The play was directed by Farley Richmond and was presented in the Seney Stovall Chapel.

BFE is fabulous in the sense that it is classic and therefore can be put into any time period. The sense that one does not belong and has no support is a struggle that many people can relate to in modern times and in times before now. This allows for fluidity in the play presentation. I believe this play could also be set in any other time period and still be able to get the main idea and purpose across. The UGA presentation of BFE stuck to the original settings and actually had little to no stage design. This was done for multiple reasons. One such reason was simply because the play did not have any funding so they had to make do with what they had. I also think this was done for a specific purpose. This purpose being that it made the actors and the characters they were presenting highly visible. The stories of all the characters were exposed and shared and we able to be more open with less background getting in the way. This story was an expose of emotion and experience and the minimalist approach helped get that across. The presentation of the storyline was fabulous. This can be seen strongly in the stage design but also in the actor’s and actress’s costume designs.

Costume design is very important for any production because makeup, accessories, clothes, shoes etc can help define a time period, a personality, a situation, an age, and so much more. It is so vital to get it all right without going too far in one direction. This costume designer had the added difficulty of having to figure out not only what would best aid the actors in getting their character’s personality and image across but also in what would be loud enough to battle the previously mentioned lack of background set design which would normally be used to aid a storyline. I think Maggie Colvin did a good job defining the roles in this sense. Isabel was in a home robe and slippers that were pink and she had tons of makeup on. This represents her inability to get out of the house. She is a super homebody but it also highlights her loud and vibrant personality. Lefty is shy and awkward and just had on normal business clothes. He changes halfway through the play and puts on a fun pattered shirt along with some cologne. This was a big move for him and represents a shift in his life. He has found love and is going out on a date. He changes and develops as a character. Then we have Panny who is wearing mom jeans, a solid shirt color tucked in and scrunchies in her hair. The entire look is a very childish look. One we would expect even a toddler to have on not a highschooler. This was important to do because the play centers on Panny’s young age and this had to be highlighted to get that across to the audience. We then have “The man” in his easy to blend in work clothes. He is ambiguous and blends in with other people. So much so that Panny does not even realize that she had seen the man before when she ses him for the second time. Nancy is wearing older, colorful, and fun clothes. This works because though she is not older than Panny she is trying to be and is way more popular. She makes some choices that separate her maturity from Panny as well. Then finally we have Evvie who is colorful and vibrant. Two things that would help define her personality. Lastly there is Hugo who is just wearing jeans, converse, and a t shirt. Typical college kid clothes. This helps humanize Hugo and makes him more relatable for every person watching the play. It allows the audience to project someone else they know who is simple and basic from their own lives onto Hugo. Hugo in a sense is almost like a blank canvas here. This projection allows more sympathy and understanding to be directed towards Panny which is important because the storyline demands that the audience be able to connect to panny and sympathize with her. These costume designs fit the characters well and the actors that wore them did a good job getting their character across with them.

The cast of BFE was diverse. We had white women and men, Asian American women, and men, and we had an African American woman. Considering the play was only comprised of 8 characters this is a lot of diversity. I believe it is super important to perform plays like this because they shed light on the topic of diversity and they are a form of representation for peoples that in the past have not had proper representation. That is why I really liked that those who cast the play stuck to minorities playing themselves. I know in a production that is not professional it can be hard to find the right actors to play the roles. Xin Tian played Hae- Yoon, Panny’s Korean pen pal through school. Though Xian Tian is not Korean but Chinese she still did a fabulous job. This does raise the question about whether it is appropriate to do this or if this part should only be acted by a Korean American or Korean actor. I think that as long as an actor has some sorty of connection to the identity and it is not “yellow face” or “Black face” etc then it is okay. I support her cast as Hae- Yoon because she did a fabulous job. She really got her role across. She was loud, funny, happy, and did a wonderful job embellishing with her hands. We get the vibe from Hae- Yoon’s letter that she is easily excited, energetic, and young. Xin did a really good job bringing this to the stage. I think Dave Kim did a fabulous job playing Lefty. He really got across the feeling that lefty was a lonely, awkward, nerdy uncle. This was produced perfectly. He did this by using subtle and slight body language and by whispering often. Rachael Simpson played Evvie. Evvie was a very colorful character in the written play and Rachael did not disappoint. She was energetic and expressive, and colorful in words, voice, language, and outfit. Beautiful casting! James Cogswell was tall and lanky which gave him an imposing appearance which worked for his character as “The Man” he was a normal guy but his height also did a good job at shaping the audiences understanding of the character relationships. He was meant to appear older than Panny and Nancy and his outfit plus his height helped achieve that look. Very well done. Hugo who was played by Tucker Turner came across as your typical college student like stated above. This was good. Nancy was played by Emma Rowe. She did not have a huge part but played her part well. She was just a typical blonde girl and she did that well. I feel like this role would have been the easiest to fill because there is not much there that requires specialization. Jack/ The General was played by Jacob Dannenfelser. He was young, charming, and handsome. He was by far the funniest character in the play and he did a fabulous time making himself appear geeky and awkward. I would say his performance was the best. He came across so natural. He really because his characters and he did not let his small hiccup of his glasses falling stop him. He just took it into stride. That is super important in any play and very well done. The only two characters I was a bit unimpressed with were Panny who was played by Connie Li and Isabel who was played by Vivian Lee- Boulton. Though they did okay they left more to be desired. Vivian plays a very colorful Isabel but I felt like a times it was too acted out. It did not seem natural. She was a bit too much at times. Isabel is already such a n odd character that it does not take a lot to make her being weird. I think if she toned it down a bit and made things a bit more subtle it would have made her character seems more realistic. Connie Li played Panny and again I felt like her performance was okay. Out of all the actors this was probably the one who’s performance I liked the least. I know it was a difficult job to be the main character there are lots of lines to remember but there were times when she would trip up over her lines and forget them. There were also times she spoke too quickly and her words got jumbled. I also do not think her acting was as smooth as it could have been. There were times were it sounded very rehearsed and there were times when it sounded like she read them from a page. I think she was a perfect fit for the role I just would have liked to see her blend into her character a bit more.

All in all I think this play was a wonderful play. The actors and actresses really put their best foot forward. I was unsure going into it if I would like it because of its lack of set, props, and background things. I think the production team and Farley Richmond did a fabulous job with using what they had to create a stasis in the play. I really felt like I could connect with the characters and though there were some mishaps I feel like overall I would want to go see it again. I am very impressed with what they were able to accomplish with so little in regards to resources.